

'It's a Funny Old World'

By Lewis Funke

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LOOKING backward was a mistake for Mrs. Lot. But, for writers, it has been a helpful habit over the centuries. Latest among the over-the-shoulder lookers are Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse, who once proclaimed, "Stop the World—I Want to Get Off." Now they are going right back to the dawn of time for a new musical, "It's a Funny Old World We Live In, But the World's Not Entirely to Blame." To make their point, the team focusing on the chronicle of a small family unit and its struggle to cope with life through the ages. The family unit, whose head will be acted by Newley, will not, however, get older, It simply will be transplanted from age to age and even from one nationality to another.

News of the Rialto

Among the subjects to be examined, according to Bricusse, will be, "the endless futility of endless wars," the authors making the oft-disregarded point that, from the beginning, the world has virtually never been without war. Ecology will be poked into, of course. And those ancient antagonists, God and the Devil, will be around, carrying on a dialogue over what went wrong with the Grand Design that we should now be where we are.

In addition to Newley, actors will be needed for the principal roles of God, the Devil, the wife and a friend of the family. Several comedians also will be needed, Bricusse reported, to help provide the vaudeville touch the musical will have. Which brings up that title and its origin: "It's a Funny Old World We Live in, But the World's Not Entirely to Blame." comes from the first two lines of an old English music hall song.

Hillard Elkins, who this season has had the satisfaction of presenting his wife Claire Bloom in her successful Ibsen repertory—"A Doll's House" and "Hedda Gabler"—in addition to co-producing "The Rothschilds," will be the producer of the Newley-Bricusse work. Rehearsals are planned for late August with a mid-November opening on Broadway sells its cigarettes, beer, automobile tires and scented feminine hygiene sprays. There may be some irony intended, but it does seem to me—a white—that a film about black militancy deserves a sterner

discipline if it wants to avoid charges of exploitation. Practically all of the real drama to be found in "Sweet Sweetback" is contained in that one little scene of the shoeshine man, and it's not actually a scene, only a part of another montage.

The most interesting thing about "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" is Melvin Van Peebles himself, although not in his capacity as either the star, the director, the writer, the composer or the editor. Rather, it's in his capacity as a phenomenon. Van Peebles is one of the few black talents to succeed in reaching a position that would allow him to direct his own movies, no mean feat in an industry that thought it had come of age with "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" Like Ossie Davis, ("Cotton Comes to Harlem"), who began as an actor and a writer, and Gordon Parks, ("The Learning Tree"), who was an internationally known still photographer, the Chicago-bred Van Peebles began by doing other things. Having earned something of a reputation as a novelist and painter in France, he was able to get together enough money to shoot his first feature over there, "The Story of a Three-Day Pass," which attracted enough attention to persuade Columbia Pictures to give him a three picture contract, and to direct the ill-fated, satirical comedy, "Watermelon Man," whose screenplay was written by Herman Raucher, the author

Now only in his late 30's, Van Peebles has a record that might lie envied by most white directors in that he has made at least three features he wanted to make, with very little outside interference. It's the kind of success story, in fact, that gives a hollow ring to the dedication of "Sweet Sweetback." (After all, Van Peebles is a celebrity in The Man's society). I am sure that Van Peebles was right when, last year, he was quoted as saying that the only sane way for a black man to act is militantly, but the militancy of "Sweet Sweetback" is of a dull order, seemingly designed only to reinforce the prejudices of black audiences without in any way disturbing those prejudices. Black audiences, I suppose, will find therapeutic value in this sort of thing—in a black black fairy tale in which all the blacks good and all the whites are evil. It may serve the process by which a black identity can be created, and if this were the sole criterion by which "Sweet Sweetback" were to be judged, it might well be called successful.

But even then, I'm not sure.

When I saw the film the other afternoon at the Cinerama Theater on Broadway, the reaction of the mostly black audience was occasionally uproarious, as, for example, in the scene in which Sweet Sweetback crushes the head of a white policeman with a loose handcuff. Although, in the context of the film, the policeman deserved everything he got, I'm not convinced that shouts of "Kick his ass!" and "Kill him!" were indicative that an especially black identity was being created. When the audience at the New Amsterdam Theater on 42d Street urges Dr. Frankenstein on to new and terrible dismemberments, does that mean the New Amsterdam audience is identifying with the downon-their-luck members of the medical profession? I suspect it simply means that the sort of audiences—black and white—who go to those movies want a little action, and they don't much care how it.

If Van Peebles's intent was to make a contemporary folk parable about a black saint, he has, I think, failed, not because his film vision is too grand, but because it's too simple. The movie looks exceedingly busy, but it isn't. Van Peebles doesn't seem to trust his scenario and, as result, he tries to add dimension to it by photographing everything as either a zoom in, as a zoom out, as a pan across, or as a cut to something else. Behind this busy technique is a slight, pale, escape drama, about a black man whose Priapic powers are of the sort that prompted daydreams (and nightmares) in master bedrooms of the Old South. By means of the buoyant comedy and wild narrative of "Cotton Comes to Harlem," Ossie Davis succeeded to a certain extent in turning such cliches and stereotypes inside out, as if, by embracing them, he ridiculed the white paranoia that created them, and, at the same time, found the underlying truth. Nothing except camera technique is turned inside out in "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song." It may be—as some of its supporters claim—the Black Experience in America, distilled to its essence. My feeling, distilled to its essence, is that that experience deserves a better film.

For another view of "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," see Page 11.